

*The Church & the
World Papers*

ISLAM AND THE GOSPEL

By

The Rev. H. U. WEITBRECHT, D.D.

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Islam and the Gospel

BY THE

REV. HERBERT UDNY WEITBRECHT, D.D.

THE work of Foreign Missions is to bring Christ to those who do not know Him. It may be summed up in two watchwords—Christ for the world, God's gift—the world for Christ, God's demand. It is this old demand that the National Mission has afresh enforced on the Church, that is on us, personally and collectively.

As we survey the world field, one religion stands out with a demand which is a clear counter-claim against "the world for Christ." "Yes," it replies, "once that claim was valid, but thirteen hundred years ago it lapsed. A new leader stepped into the place of Christ: The world is for Mohammed; he is the final messenger and revealer of God."

The issue is plain enough, yet ever since the summons of Mohammed to the neighbouring Christian nations to accept him and the Koran, the mass of Christendom has either burked it or answered it with force for force, instead of with the Christ-life against the life of the Arabian prophet. The fruitlessness of this wrong answer has produced in many circles a sense of pessimism regarding Christian Missions to Islam. There are plenty of people who maintain that the conversion of a Mohammedan to the faith of Christ is as good as impossible, and once that position is accepted, it is not difficult to find reasons for abstaining from the attempt to evangelise the Moslem. Is

he not a monotheist and a propagator of monotheism? Has not his religion (generally speaking) grappled successfully with the evil of strong drink, against which even in war-time we dare not act effectively? Does he not in this and other ways raise the uncivilised pagan of Africa to a higher stage of religion and culture? These questions will answer themselves if we consider carefully what Islam actually is in the world and in itself.

THE EMPIRE OF ISLAM

We see it spread over a great area of the earth's surface, running through the northern heat zone of Africa and Asia, from Morocco in the West to Malaysia in the East, with occasional out-reaches to the temperate zone, especially in Central Asia and China. This area comprises nations of ancient culture, such as Egypt, Persia, and parts of India and China, together with others who have emerged or are just emerging from the stage of primitive culture, as in Malaysia and Central Africa.

The total Moslem population of the world is very variously estimated, for many Moslems live in countries where there is no reliable census. It may be anything between 200 and 230 millions. Broadly speaking, these lands have been brought under the sway of Islam by conquest and race migration, followed up by teaching and political and social pressure.

During eleven hundred years* (except in China) Moslem religion and Moslem rule went together; for Islam regards Church and State as twin brothers. But last century saw a complete reversal of this relationship. Following upon

* The Moslem era dates from the *Hijra* or "flight" of Mohammed from Mecca to Medina in A.D. 621, and is calculated by lunar years.

the Battle of Plassey in 1757, India came stage by stage under British dominion, and with it 65 millions of Moslems. Moslems now live under Dutch rule in Malaysia, under French and Italian rule in Northern and Central Africa, and of the whole Moslem population of the world, reckoned by Westermann and Zwemer at 201 millions, 167 millions are under Christian rulers, 90 millions of these being in British Dominions or Protectorates. Whatever else this may involve now or hereafter, it assuredly means that the Church of England has a unique responsibility towards the Moslems of the world and of the empire, and their mutual influence must bring about large issues for good or ill. This is inevitable because of the ever closer contact, not merely political and commercial, but in matters of thought and social life between the Moslem and the Christian peoples. In former ages Islam and Christendom stood over against each other as warring political powers, each in virtual ignorance of what the other really believed and practised. Within the last century the Moslem world has become aware that its political inferiority is due to backwardness in knowledge, and its application. On all hands modernist movements, under the influence of Western culture, are growing in the world of Islam, and the old system of education, based upon the Koran and traditions, is being more and more discarded for training in modern knowledge according to modern methods taken from the West. Even during the present war a conservative country like Turkey is radically remodelling its system of education, basing it broadly on elementary schools for the people. These movements are arousing questionings, to which the Moslem, with his petrified old-world philosophy, can as yet give little answer. Together with the

results of Christian missionary work, they are leading in some cases to a propaganda of Islam in Western lands, with an imitation of Western missionary methods. The change of political relations between Christendom and Islam has been brought into strong relief by the present war, in which the cleavage among combatants runs along political and racial lines, regardless of religious distinctions. The allegiance of the Moslem is given to his Christian ruler or ally on political grounds, and Moslem is arrayed against Moslem in loyalty to those from whom he has experienced or hopes for political and social benefits. But the world of Islam is needing something more at our hands than these : it wants the power from which they spring. Why has it not got this in the faith of Islam ? This question must be answered by considering that faith in itself.

THE FAITH OF ISLAM

No Mohammedan would speak of his religion as Mohammedanism, unless it were by way of explaining it to an outsider. He calls it Islam and himself a Moslem (or Muslim). The name indicates the essential nature of the faith. Islam at its origin did not profess to be a new religion. Mohammed claimed that it was continuous with the former revelations which God had given both in Judaism and in Christianity. Islam means "acceptance," * and Moslem "accepter." The Moslem regards himself as one who accepts the will of God, as revealed through His prophets from the beginning of the world, and the last of these prophets, he holds, is Mohammed, the son of Abdallah, in whom all former revelations are summed up.

* Others take cognate meanings of the same Arabic root as "resignation" or "surrender."

THE CHIEF DOCTRINES

What, then, are the chief doctrines of this faith, which professes to be a continuation and reformation of our own? As we have our Apostles' Creed, so the Moslem has the articles of his faith summed up after a simple fashion, and even a villager who understands his religion at all intelligently will be able to recite some such creed as the following, called in Arabic *amantu*, "I believe." A widely used popular catechism recites seven articles: (1) I believe in God, (2) and in His angels, (3) and in His books, (4) and in His apostles, (5) and in the Last Day, (6) and in the determination of good and evil by God Most High, (7) and in the resurrection after death. Among the "Books" are included the Old and the New Testament, superseded, however, by the Koran. Among the "Apostles," the Moslem acknowledges Moses, Jesus, and many others, of whom Mohammed is the last and greatest.

There is also a yet shorter creed, somewhat corresponding to our Gloria, known as the Kalima, or Watchword: "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is the apostle of Allah." Repetition of this formula before witnesses is sufficient for admission into the brotherhood of Islam. Circumcision and other ceremonies are largely used, but this is the one thing needful.

We may summarise the faith of Islam as belief in God, in His revelation to mankind, and in His judgment of the world.

The doctrine of God and His attributes not only pervades Mohammedan theology, but the commonest and the most important affairs of life are equally prefaced with the formula, *Bismillāhī'r Rahmānī'r Rahīm* ("In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful"). Before the butcher kills an animal, before the food is eaten,

before the child has his first lesson in the alphabet, before a writer begins his book—these words are used till they have come simply to mean “beginning.” If you ask a friend to come to see you he will reply in Arabic *Inshā Allāh* (“If God be pleased”). If he sees anything very beautiful, he exclaims *Subhān Allāh* (“Glory to God”). The idea of God’s power and greatness is constantly expressed in such ways, though these phrases may not mean as much to the Oriental as to the Western, for the tendency of the one is towards demonstrativeness, but of the other towards reticence.

THE CENTRAL DUTIES

Passing on from the doctrines which were taken over from Judaism and Christianity by Islam, we find also its central duties in substance copied from the Gospel. In the Sermon on the Mount our Saviour, in expounding His law of righteousness, deals with three chief forms of it, viz., almsgiving, fasting, and prayer, as expressing the Christian’s love of his brother, his control of himself, and his communion with God. These three duties form the framework of the moral teaching of Islam, but they are differently treated. Our Saviour laid down vital principles to be inwardly assimilated, and so to regenerate character and life in all its forms. Mohammed laid down rules to be outwardly followed, their outward details, equally with their inward essence, being fixed by an absolute divine command. Thus the alms of the Moslem are to be given on a regular scale—so much of his property, so much of his income, and so forth. Similarly, in regard to prayers, and fasting, the directions given are precise and definite, and the merit of the act depends on their accurate observance.

The times of prayer Mohammed adapted from the Jewish hours of morning, noon, and evening, inserting one in the afternoon and one after nightfall, thus making up five daily prayer times. In addition there are midnight prayers and others which may be offered as exercises of special religious merit. The five times of prayer are incumbent upon the Moslem as far as he is able to carry them out, but he may be excused under certain circumstances—in illness, or on a journey, or in danger. If possible the Moslem should pray with a congregation ; if not, he must perform his prayers wherever he happens to be. It is the prayers of the Moslem that convey the most vivid impression of his religion to the outsider. Every traveller in the East is impressed by the sound of the call to prayers as it is recited by the muezzin in musical tones, especially at evening time when the song rings out from the minarets of the mosques—"God is great ! God is great ! I bear witness that there is no God but Allah and Mohammed is the apostle of Allah. Come to prayers, come to salvation," concluding with repetition of the phrases in the reverse order.

To appreciate the great fast of the month of Ramazān we must remember that Mohammed took over the old Arabian calendar with its lunar year of only 354 days. Hence the months go round our calendar and Ramazān may come at any season. During the hours of daylight throughout the month neither food nor drink may pass the lips. When Ramazān falls in an Indian summer with the shade temperature at 115 degrees, one realises what the effort means. But it is mitigated by permission to eat and drink freely after sunset and before sunrise ; and the housewife's expenses are not less during the month of fasting.

THE " FIVE PILLARS "

Add to these observances of alms, prayer and fasting, two more and you have the " five pillars " of Mohammedan duty. The first is confession of the faith. The Kalima is not only to be recited when a man becomes a Moslem, but also when he hears anything against his faith. It also forms part of many religious observances, notably marriage.

The fifth great duty is the Pilgrimage to Mecca, which visibly binds together the Mohammedan world as a brotherhood. Abraham, according to the tradition current in Mohammed's time, had erected a sanctuary in Mecca, known as the Ka'ba or cube. Built into the wall of it is a black stone, really a meteorolite, which Mohammedans say Abraham received from heaven and placed there. It was undoubtedly an object of idolatrous veneration before Mohammed finally connected it with the Abrahamic tradition and made its shrine the central place for the gathering of believers. Though the ceremonies of the pilgrimage go back to idolatrous times, yet Mohammed claimed for each a revelation from Allah. Every year in the lunar month of pilgrimage, the faithful flock in multitudes to Mecca and make the circuit of the central cube or sanctuary many times, kissing the black stone as they pass. For the many illiterate followers of the prophet the annual pilgrimage has served as a palpable world-wide link. No doubt they are unmercifully fleeced, for Mecca offers no exception to the bad repute of places of pilgrimage. Yet, notwithstanding the ill-treatment from which the pilgrims suffer, they mostly go back to their countries more devoted to their faith than before—more bigoted, more contemptuous towards the infidel, more anxious to spread their religion and honoured among their people as a Hājl.

FESTIVALS AND MOURNING

To realise the religious life of Islam, one should notice also its two great festivals and its day of mourning.

When the long fast is over and people may again partake of food in the daytime there is great rejoicing. The fast comes to an end when the new moon has first been seen, and it is eagerly looked for. Rows of people line the road gazing eastwards after sunset. They are watching for the crescent moon. To tell a guest that he is the "moon of the festival" is to offer him the most cordial welcome. Next morning believers may take their meals as usual. After breakfast they assemble in immense numbers at the mosques, all in white clothing. This service of the "breaking of the Fast" is a deeply impressive sight.

The other chief festival, of Sacrifice, is connected with the pilgrimage. It forms a kind of link between Islam on the one hand and the Old and New Testaments on the other. The tenth day of the month of pilgrimage is devoted to a memorial of the sacrifice by Abraham on Mount Moriah; only in the Mohammedan tradition the person who was to be sacrificed is Ishmael and not Isaac. A camel, an ox, or a goat may be slain, and the rite is observed, not only in Mecca but all over the Mohammedan world. It is a time of rejoicing, and friends send portions of the sacrifice to one another with congratulations. The blunder in reproducing the Scriptural narrative is characteristic of the Koranic legends, but none the less does the story offer an opening to the Christian messenger.

The tenth day of the month Muharram is the anniversary of the slaughter of Husain, the grandson of the prophet, by Mu'avia, the rival Caliph of Damascus, a tragedy of the early Civil War of Islam. It is a day of mourning, observed

with much pomp by the Shīah sect, who reverence Husain as a martyr and as their great Imām or leader. Long dirges on his sufferings are sung, and commemorative funeral processions are held in which men and women beat their breasts and bewail the martyr Imām. One is reminded, by way of contrast, of another Death and another Mourning.

WHY MISSIONS TO ISLAM ?

Islam thus confronts us with a faith on the foundations of which we also stand. Take the Apostles' Creed, and about half of it will hold good for the Moslem as well as for ourselves. Why, then, should Islam be an object of missionary effort ? Why are we now called upon to consider what the Church is doing to meet its advance and her duty to do a great deal more than she has hitherto done for the conversion of the Moslem ? For our present purpose it will be sufficient to take two reasons.

THE DEFECTS OF ISLAM ARE THE FAULTS OF THE CHURCH

The first is this. Consider what it is that Islam has excised from the Creed. It confesses, "I believe in God . . . Almighty. Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ . . . born of the Virgin Mary. . . . Ascended into heaven, Who will come again . . . the forgiveness of sins . . . the resurrection of the dead, the life everlasting." These beliefs he shares with us. What has he left out ? The fatherhood of God ; the incarnation, death, resurrection and reign of Christ ; the gift of the Holy Spirit dwelling in the believer and the Church ; precisely those truths in virtue of which we have reconciliation with a holy God, filial approach to a heavenly Father and likeness to Him. Moham-

med strenuously repudiated the worship of God as Father. To a mind recoiling from Arab pagan notions it connoted sexual ideas which he believed to be unworthy of God. And denying the fatherhood of God, Mohammed could not believe in the sonship of man, nor in the possibility that a sinless human nature could be the true dwelling-place and manifestation of God. Here we find the fundamental difference between Islam and Christianity; they have different conceptions of God. Over against a God who is first holiness and love Mohammed sets a God who is power first and foremost, who is indeed compassionate, but compassionate on an arbitrary basis, not because it is right and He must do right, but because it pleases Him. Again, when we pass to those clauses of the creed which deal with our redemption, Islam, no doubt, believes in Jesus Christ, the Son of Mary, and regards Him as holy—indeed, there is a passage in the Traditions which says that Satan has touched all the children of men except Jesus, the Son of Mary, and there is no mention in the Koran of sin done or confessed by Him. But Christ's death is explicitly denied. Denying His death, Islam also denies His redeeming work; and all idea of atonement made by Him is repudiated. Again, the conception of the Holy Spirit has fallen out of the creed of Islam. Once the Moslem has confessed his belief in the Angels "I believe in the Holy Ghost" is meaningless to him. He has the term "Holy Spirit" in the Koran, but merely as a designation of the angel Gabriel. The Holy Spirit, he reads there, came from Allah and whispered His revelation in the prophet's ear, meaning that Gabriel brought the chapters of the Koran piecemeal to Mohammed, who recited them and caused them to be written down. All the glorious and life-giving power which flows from

the existence and work of the Holy Spirit has shrunk into the idea of an angel who comes with a message that the prophet is required to repeat verbatim to his followers. Islam has lost the idea of sanctification by a personal divine indwelling and of union with a God, Almighty but loving. Yet all these great defects arouse in the Christian no pride of superiority, but rather a sense of humiliation, for it was through the corruptness of the Christian Church of Mohammed's day that Islam lost the message of salvation which our blessed Lord and Saviour brought to mankind, and the Church to whom He has now opened the door is doubly bound to evangelise the Moslem, not only by the universal command of her Lord but by the urgent duty of repairing her great fault.

GOD AND MORALITY

This leads us to the second reason for this Christian duty. In obscuring the revelation of a holy loving God Islam has lost the greatest lever for holiness of life. The doctrinal difference that we have noticed is no mere theological matter. It profoundly influences the individual life of the believer and the life of the society to which he belongs.

In place of a Heavenly Father the Mohammedan has the idea of an Almighty God who is the absolute embodiment of force. He is, so to speak, non-moral, for He may if He chooses command or allow what is immoral in one whom He desires specially to indulge, as, the Koran says, He did in the case of the prophet of Mecca. Now what a man worships to that he becomes assimilated, and the morality of Islam is in accordance with its idea of God as all-powerful and of His right as based only upon that power.

We see the effect of this view of God, for example, in the relation of the sexes. Man is the more powerful, and hence it is lawful to a man to have four wives and as many slave girls as he pleases in his harem, while the woman is strictly bound to her one lord and master. Again, a man has power to divorce his wife at his pleasure, while a similar right on the part of the woman is merely theoretical. An able Indian Moslem truly writes : "The Eastern wife may at any moment be dislodged by another and relegated to a lasting sorrow and gloom." The assertion that permissive polygamy prevents the evils connected with prostitution is flatly contrary to facts. Still less has it proved a safeguard against unnatural vice. The jealousy of the stronger sex demands that women must be married at the earliest possible age and secluded from general intercourse. They thus remain illiterate and often physically stunted, and the development and training of childhood suffers incalculably.

This principle of the predominance of force affects also the life of the State and of the household. Mohammed claimed a divine revelation to fight for the extension of Islam, and it is still lawful and even incumbent on the Moslem to use force for the advancement of his faith if it is possible for him to do so. If he has not the power then he may obey the rulers whom Allah has put over him. The same principle holds good in the household. It is lawful to acquire slaves by warfare or purchase. The slave girl is at the disposal of her master. It is meritorious to give freedom to a slave because the act is the renunciation of a lawful possession.

The legislation of the Koran represented an advance upon the conditions of society in pagan Arabia of the seventh century, but the conditions of modern Arabia in the twentieth century well

illustrate its failure permanently to raise even a nation of such brilliant endowment as the Arab. That legislation was a reversion to Judaism without the expansive power of the Messianic hope. It based its reforms on "ordinances"—"touch not, taste not, handle not"—which have proved to be of little "value against the indulgence of the flesh." It went back from the one sufficient principle, of the Christian's relation to the world—"All things are yours, and ye are Christ's, and Christ is God's"—setting commands as to food and drink and posture on a level with the weightier matters of the law. Therefore it has lacked the inner force which alone can cope with the "unruly wills and affections of sinful men," when the forces of nature are placed at their disposal by the progress of the race.

But while we say this, do not let us forget what we may learn from Islam, for Mohammed undoubtedly started as a reformer of corrupt conditions, both religious and moral, and had the love and teaching of Christ been truly presented to him by the Church of that day, we may well believe that he would have been a reformer, instead of a destroyer, of the Christian faith. As it is, his followers teach us the duty of open and unashamed acknowledgment of God and His authority in every department of life. They give to us also a wholesome example of zeal in the propagation of the faith which they believe, whatever mistaken forms that zeal may at times assume; and surely we may well learn from them the necessity of inculcating total abstinence upon the backward races of the world with whom we come into contact, if our intercourse with them is to be for their benefit and not for their ruin—to say nothing of its value for ourselves. But the permanent root of these and all other virtues we find only in the supreme revelation of God's

great gift in the incarnation and atonement of His Son and the bestowal of His Spirit.

THE DELAY OF ELEVEN CENTURIES

Is there, then, any reason for believing that the undoubted command of Christ to "make disciples of all the nations" is subject to a moratorium in the case of the peoples who profess Islam? The answer is "No." What was the cause of the delay in the postponement of this work through eleven centuries? It was that the evangelist had no access to Moslem peoples. No Moslem could become a Christian and live in his own land. To be converted was to be banished or murdered. Not till after the middle of the eighteenth century, when Moslems began to come under Christian rule, could the Christian missionary gain any access at all to them. But now almost the whole of the Mohammedan world is a field where the Gospel may be proclaimed without fear or favour. It is impossible for us now not to influence the Moslem world, so largely subject to Christian powers, either for good or ill. The only question is which the influence shall be.

The results of abstaining from evangelisation for more than a millennium are plain enough. Our mutual relations have been un-Christian and the Christian Church has suffered sometimes disaster, and at all times more or less leakage to Islam.

The Moslem world is still aiming to convert Christians, and is ready to take over the fruits of Christian missions in pagan lands if the Christian missionary is too faithless to bring the Gospel to the Moslem. Our only effective defence is attack. But the weapons of our attack are the spiritual forces of Christian light and love. The message of the Bible, which the Moslem allows to be a divine revelation, translated and preached by the

evangelist, and the ministry of healing carried on by the medical missionary, have gone far to alter the whole attitude of the Moslem towards the Christian and his faith, and thousands of Christian converts from Islam of many nationalities and classes, often tested by severe persecution, shew that the message of Christ is going home.

The Moslem world as it emerges into the glare of Western science and education needs something that it has not got, if it is to keep its hold on those great foundation truths which it shares with us. Some years ago a well-known Indian Moslem writer, referring to the inrush of Western customs and thought, said to a friend of mine : " Sahib, make us English if you must, in our ways ; but leave us our God." The Koranic conception will not stand the strain of modern thought. By the true revelation of Christ we would help the Moslem to preserve and strengthen his faith in God.

Yet it is not as possessors of superior culture or education that we go to the Moslem, but because of those needs which we share with him and because of our desire to give him the best that we have to supply those needs. We all of us begin life on the same level of human nature, and its weaknesses and perversities hamper us as they do others and darken our vision of God. It is Christ and His love which alone can cope with our own sins and weaknesses, and this we offer to the Moslem world in His Name.

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